

**Sense of Community  
with Upward Bound Students**

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### **Abstract**

Through focus group interviews, this study explores at risk high school students' perceptions of their communities. Participants are members of a Maine Upward Bound program that pre-identified them as low SES, and first-generation college bound students. My purpose for this study is to discover if students who are at risk of public school failure based on environmental and social disadvantages will benefit if they feel a sense of belonging to their communities. Bronfenbrenner's systems of development, as well as the social concept *gemeinschaft*, often translated "community" are part of the conceptual framework of this study. This qualitative study used QSR-N6 to code for attributes of community and themes that emerged as important to students in their development of sense of belonging. Many students related a sense of community to having positive relationships with adults and peers within that community. Students reported a stronger "sense of belonging" to their Upward Bound community, commenting that the culture of the Upward Bound community offers them a "safe" place where they "can be themselves" while developing skills necessary to help them in the future.

*CSB: How important is it for you to feel like you belong to a group?*

*John: It's part of you, really. I mean, I think it builds your self-esteem, your – it builds who you are - I think it builds on you. It builds your character, really, who you are and how you see life as it is...I mean, if you don't belong to anything, then how do you know yourself? How do you know where you fit in? How do you know anything about yourself? You have to fit in somewhere –*

## **Introduction**

A former high school teacher, my doctoral interest is in at risk adolescents, their educational and developmental needs, and strategies to keep them from dropping out of school. My purpose for this study is to discover if students who are at risk based on environmental and social disadvantages will benefit if they feel a sense of belonging to their communities. Students share their communities with peers as friends and classmates, but they also must interact with adults - as staff, as family, and as figures of authority. I asked teen-agers who participate in Upward Bound, an academic outreach program for low SES, and first generation college students, to elaborate on their perceptions of their sense of belonging to their residential community, their high school community and their Upward Bound community.

My broad research questions were: 1) Can a sense of belonging to a community promote academic and social growth? 2) Does size of community make a difference? 3) Are smaller communities more able to create and/or cultivate a sense of belonging? and, 4) Can communities help students take more responsibility for their individual well-being? What emerged in the findings were attributes of community that were important to this student population, the transportability of a sense of belonging, and the sustainability and influence a sense of community has on students' perceptions of their social-emotional and academic growth.

## **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, *community* will mean a group of people who share a common setting with a set of established norms. In this context, there are three common communities: residential, high school, and the summer Upward Bound program. Bronfenbrenner (1993) nests these communities into separate systems, and smaller subsets of those systems, which he calls microsystems. He theorizes these different systems

can affect cognitive, emotional, affective, and social development. Upward Bound students are unique in that they are members of three distinct microsystems and must travel regularly between each community.

Tönnies conceptualized a social *gemeinschaft*, translated, “community.” The social assumptions and underlying principles of *gemeinschaft* reinforce the values of trust, friendship, nurturing, and caring for all individuals. This shared value system, Tönnies posits, also lends itself to the feeling of belonging to a population of people as well as upholding the tenets of that community. Meier (2002) believes schools should not only impart a sense of community, but should also impact students’ sense of humanity, “It is in the schools that we learn the art of living together as citizens...Schools are where we learn what it means to own one’s community and have a stake in its reputation” (pp.176-177).

The term, *at risk*, is also complex. There are several definitions, perspectives, and identified risk factors. Davis (2004) states that contemporary research is now focused on the student in context, “conditions both in the child, and in the nature of the environments in which the child lives” (p.6).<sup>1</sup> Many agree, however, that some environmental factors are linked to substantial risk to drop out of high school, i.e., the school context, family conditions, SES, and educational attainment of parents (Davis, 2004; NCES, 2004).

## Background

Upward Bound is a federally funded program that serves public high school students in targeted schools around the country and whose families live below, or at the federal poverty level. At least two-thirds of the served population also must have parents who have not attained a college degree. One-third of the students can meet either one of the requirements and still be eligible. These students fall into a risk category of not only non-completion of high school, but also have SAT scores well below those of their middle income and high income peer group.<sup>2</sup> Lower scores also lowers chances of being considered competitive to some college programs. Upward Bound seeks to bridge that gap, and give lower income stu-

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<sup>1</sup> Davis warns that it is important to clarify that lists of attributes of at risk students are not labels, that this is not a homogenous group, that potentially, all students can be *at risk*, that it sometimes is a temporary condition and that this is a relative term used to predict future outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> SOURCE: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). Access date: 2/15/04.

dents opportunities to attend and finish a college degree program. Nationwide, Upward Bound serves more than 42,000 students. (Myers & Schirm, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

During the school year, the students in this study participate in a pullout academic counseling program every other week, as well as participate in other activities such as UB reunions and college visits. This program, like many UB programs also hosts a Math/Science component. While the objectives remain the same for the Math/Science program, students are recruited based on their interest in attaining degrees in these academic areas. Typically, the staff works with all students on writing college essays, filling out FAFSA forms, and monitoring academic progress. They also distribute waivers for SAT or ACT exams, and the program provides college application fees. While all students are encouraged to attend the residential portion of Upward Bound, not all choose to do so. Usually, 150 students from the served student population; a temporary summer staff of 50 plus graduate students and professionals; and year-round staff make up the summer community.

Since the majority of these teens have no experience living away from home, the summer program introduces these students to social aspects of college life. Students live in a college dorm, eat in a dining hall, take classes and workshops, attend meetings, participate in activities and community service, and present their summer academic work in final event of paper presentations, demonstrations, and posters. As a way to offer students a summer income, many have part-time jobs off campus that match their career interests.

Since this particular Upward Bound program hosts the only Math/Science component in New England, it serves students from more urban high schools in the New England region. The diverse ethnic and cultural background of students from the Math/Science program is introduced to Maine students.

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<sup>3</sup> The national impact of Upward Bound is reported in a longitudinal study by the Mathematica Policy Research, (1999). This report states: Although Upward Bound had small impacts on students as a whole, some groups of students received greater benefits...(1) students with lower initial educational expectations benefited substantially more than those with higher expectations, (2) boys showed substantially larger impacts than girls, (3) Hispanic and white students benefited more than African American students, (4) students who were low-income only or low-income and potential first-generation college students showed larger impacts than those who qualified for the program only as potential first-generation students, and (5) poorer performing students benefited substantially more than their better performing peers (p.57)

Maine schools, typically, have a minority population of less than 5%<sup>4</sup>. For many students in this program, this is their first lived experience with a different cultural/ethnic peer group.

## **Sample and Method**

### *The sample*

The study participants are high school students in the Upward Bound program who attended the 2004, six-week summer residential program. I recruited only those students who returned signed consent forms. They are “rising” juniors, seniors, and first-year college students, or Bridge students. The total number of students who attended the summer program, 152, represented 28 New England and central Maine area high schools. I interviewed 37 students, ages 15-18, or 24% of the total population. Twenty-two students were Classic Upward Bound students, and came from central Maine communities, and 15 participants were in the Math/Science program.

High schools were classified as small, medium and large by size of enrollment.<sup>5</sup> Since I could find no consensus on what officially constitutes these categories, for this study I defined large high schools as those having a student enrollment of over 800 students. A medium size high school has a student enrollment of 400-800 students, while a small high school enrolls less than 400 students.

Overall, focus groups consisted of: 4 high school groups of Classic Upward Bound students; 3 groups of students from the Math/Science program; and 1 group of students who are single (i.e., no other UB students at their high school) participants of their Upward Bound program. The latter group represented five different high schools, and all were participants in the Math/Science program. Study participants were from 5 large high schools, 2 medium sized high schools, and 5 small high schools in four general geographic communities. Students’ residential communities were coded coastal, farming, forest, and urban depending on geographic location.

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<sup>4</sup> from Maine Dept. of Education, [www.state.maine.gov/ed](http://www.state.maine.gov/ed). See References page.

<sup>5</sup> Maine students also identify their high school as Class A, Class B, and Class C. The Maine Principal’s Association uses this classification to organize high school sports programs, based on high school enrollment. Many students knew which Class high school they were, although I double-checked the Maine Department of Education’s ([www.maine.gov/ed](http://www.maine.gov/ed)) statistics on enrollment for participating high schools. While each high school has been de-identified in this study, it was important to me to establish to which size high schools students felt more connected.

### *Research method*

Eight focus groups were organized according to the following criteria: 1) signed parental or guardian consent forms for minors were returned to me; 2) a maximum focus group participant number from each high school (5-8 students) was available; 3) a diverse representation of high schools both in size and geographic location; and 4) both the Classic and the Math/Science programs were represented. Focus groups were video and audio taped. The focus group questions were informal, broad, and allowed students to have opportunities to discuss unique situations in their high schools and communities. I piloted questions first with UB alumnae, and rewrote for clarity. Using qualitative software QSR N6, I coded transcripts and field notes for attributes of community, feelings of connections and/or belonging to a community, the nature of their relationships, and the import and impact of sense of belonging.

### **Subjectivity**

I began this study with a belief that the small school system would have stronger sense of community, more positive staff and peer relationships, and would be a place where more students felt successful. I was sure that larger high schools would not be able to sustain a sense of community. I was aware that I might look for data, or interpret data to support my position; therefore, coding included both positive and negative attributes of most themes. My past participation in the Upward Bound community as a summer staff member (from 1998-2000) served as another impetus for the study. While I didn't know any of the study participants, I was aware of the community and value system that Upward Bound supports. I wanted to disassociate from that knowledge, and try to focus on current student perceptions.

### **Findings**

#### *Relationships*

Interpersonal relationships, interaction with teachers, and being able to trust peer groups, are themes that emerged as students discussed components necessary for them to feel a sense of community. The most important component of community for participants was their relationships with adult members of that community.

### *Relationships with adults*

When asked, *what makes a good adult relationship*, 19 students (51%) responded to this question with a clear perception of what they expect from an adult-student relationship. Having staff *that care about them*, they indicated as most important. I prompted this response for more specificity; what does it mean to care? Roughly nine categories emerged: *leveling the hierarchy of power* is important for 37% of the respondents, and 37% also tied leveling power to *understanding/relating* to them. Brenda, from a large high school, says:

Being able to relate...when you don't have the 'I'm better than you, I'm higher than you,' when you have respect for both sides, like you respect them and they respect you just as much – it makes it a lot better. A lot of teachers don't even care.

Approximately, 32% of the participants responded they had positive relationships with staff members who *are fun, creative and/or innovative*. Age is a factor for 26% of the students; one student used the words “old, conservative and decrepit,” when describing teachers she didn't relate to, while another student from a small high school explained that teachers who are closer to their age are “a lot more appealing in class. We understand them.” The teens (21%) commented that they have positive relationships with teachers who are *available, accessible, and had time for them*, and 16% indicated that they have positive relationships with teachers who genuinely *loved what they were doing*, were “happy” or “wanted to be there.” Terina and Sasha, Latina students from a large urban high school, said that *academic press* is important; teachers who challenge them, set high expectations, and push them to do better are the teachers they respect. Some students (10%) listed negative adult attitudes that prevent a positive relationship: hypocritical, yells at students, complains, and “nice enough, but not useful.” Some students feel that adults should act “like kids” occasionally:

CSB: So do you like the teachers that you can kind of joke around with, then?

Dennis (large urban high school): Yeah, it's actually cool to do that, because it's like the whole equality thing, like you know you're pretty much at the same level.

Kayla, from a small high school in a forest community, indicated that a good relationship is important for other reasons. She says:



If you have trouble understanding stuff in class, especially, a teacher, you need to have a good relationship with your teacher, because if you don't understand anything in the class, then you have to be able to say, "Look, I don't understand" - and they should be able to work with you, I guess, and if you know you have a good relationship with a teacher, then you won't be afraid to go ask for help. I know a lot of people are afraid to ask for help - they're like, oh, the teacher will yell at me -

Another student from a large high school responded similarly:

Andy: It really gives you confidence, too, that someone there believes in you, and thinks you could do well....It makes the classes funner and easier, too.

When interacting with an adult, equity, not equality, is important for Lauren who describes a relationship she respects:

He [the resident director] understands that we want some structure, but not complete structure. If we do something wrong then there are consequences, but don't overdo it - he gets us like that, he doesn't, like - he knows that we're almost adults but not quite - we need a little faith in there, and he gives that to us -

Students from large and small schools thought addressing staff by first names, as they do in their UB community, was a way to balance power; many believed that teachers who were older would be more resistant to this. The following is a discussion with students from a large Massachusetts high school:

Michael: Those people, the older generation, we call them, Mr. Whatever, fill in the blank - the other people, they don't care if you call them their first name as long as you don't do it around administrative people - then they'll get in trouble. Cause you're not supposed to have personal relationships with students, they're not supposed to, like, get attached to children, you're supposed to send them off in the world and have them do their own thing - like a bird -

CSB: How is that different? Calling your [UB] staff by their first name?

Terina: More comfortable? Like?

Andy: They really don't show us their ranking - like Mr., like a title when you get all into yourself.

Carlos: Calling them by their first name is, like, you know each other.

Andy: I think it's better if we call them by their first names because then it shows the whole personal relationship thing, and that's why a lot of people, *everyone* connects with an adult here.

Carlos: Some teachers are old, and they want respect from the students, so I think much different, and sometimes they don't like it cause - I don't know.

CSB: Do they feel disrespected? When you call your staff here at Upward Bound here by their first name, do you feel like you are disrespecting them?

Sasha & Carlos: No.

Andy: No, because of the environment.

### *Relationships with peers*

Students' relationships with peers in their communities also function on different levels. When I asked students to define a "really good friend," or to tell me the difference between a "really good friend" and simply an "acquaintance," 21 students (57%) responded. Students from each focus group (48% of the respondents) compared friendships in Upward Bound to friendships in high school. The concept of *cliques* emerged. *Trust* was the most important attribute for 33% of the student respondents; 29% commented on, and often tied with trust, *confidentiality*; 20% said *share things, and go places*; 20% believed a good friend *didn't talk behind your back*; 14% didn't like friends who *judged or put down*; 10% believed a good friend *stood up for you and defended you*; and 10% of the students said that a good friend is someone they *bond with, and care about*.

Cliquing is not an unusual behavior for adolescents, and does not discriminate between sizes of high schools. When discussing peer groups, or friendships, 5 out of 8 groups describe cliques as part of their social culture. For some, it is a problem, for others it is simply accepted as part of their high school interactions. Elise, from the smallest high school in this study says:

...people I've been friends with since, like, second grade, and they, like form relationships and everything, it's like one huge clique instead of 20 little different ones, and so, if you're not in them from the beginning, then you're never in them, unless you become someone they, like, want to cling to – which is really weird, so everyone thinks it's like some great, awesome community and everyone there is part of it, but it's not really that way.

Students from a medium size high school have this conversation:

CSB: So are cliques a problem in your school?

Randy: Not really a problem...

Lauren: Sometimes they can be a problem, like, if I got into a fight with somebody from a different clique, and like everybody in that clique would be talking – they're not really physical.

Randy: Well...

Lauren: Well, sometimes – but there aren't like major fights –

Randy: There's also the cliques that are friend with the principal's son that got caught drinking, and instead of getting kicked off the basketball team like they were supposed to, they got special timeouts, and changed the whole drug policy just so his son could play. *That's* the kind of cliques we have.

Becky, also from a medium size school listed the different cliques, but believes that she is a sort of "floater" and can easily belong to each of them because of her own personal characteristics:

In high school, I don't feel like I need to belong to anybody, because I talk to everybody. We have the "sport" group, we have the "pretty" group, we have the "preppy" group, we have the "Johnny" group, we have the "slutty" group, we have the "gothic" group, we have the "hick" group – I talk to everybody, it's like, even though you might not talk to every single one of them, you always have a friend from a different group in high school.

Becky also goes on to say that these friends are "acquaintances," however, and not "true" friends.

Students indicated that *trust* is important for a true friendship. Trusting a friend was often linked with being able to confide a personal issue to another peer and having it remain with that peer. Angela, John, Matt and Billy, from a small forest community clarify:

Angela: Well, if you have somebody like an acquaintance talk about somebody else, then they're probably not a good friend.

John: There's so much judgment going on at [names high school]...and you're not guaranteed your comfort there - you don't know how somebody's going to react. You know, 'he's had problems - you don't want to be around him' ...yeah, I mean, we do have friends - but I wouldn't trust them to say anything personal...I mean, I know that it will get back to somebody - I know it will, it's a small school, there's too many people you cannot trust, and people disown people all the time in that school. Just sitting at the lunch table and listening people talk trash about somebody who puts their tray away - like I hate that kid, or "faggot" or something-

Matt: It can even be an attack –

Billy: We've gotten past the behind the back thing, they're talking as if they're not even there -

John: I do have a few people that I would recommend them coming here, cause they'd just love it here - they'd fit right in. But at [names high school] they're bogged down with the stereotypes, and all that.

Dennis, from an urban school with an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students, believes that not only is trust important, but that, "True friends are the people that you can trust your life with – and it's really hard to find people like that."

Many students compared and contrasted Upward Bound friendships to high school friendships as a way to define their understandings of a "good" friend. Students observed the absence of cliques, free-

dom to talk openly and honestly, comfort, and safety in the Upward Bound community. With the exception of one small high group, students agreed that relationships in Upward Bound are different than their relationships in high school:

Randy: Acceptance here is different, like here there's just no cliques at all, I mean everybody is just friends with everybody.

Lauren, from the same school, agrees:

Well, here there aren't really best friends, I mean everybody is your friend, because you know on some level if you go through something they've either been through something worse or been through something just as bad, so you know you can trust them - trusting isn't an issue here. And then what's said here is safe. That's not a thing at all – just more open-minded people - I don't know if that was a thing you signed up for - that you had to be open-minded or something - but just everybody is.

Dennis and Tom, both from schools with enrollments over 1200, also believe trust and confidentiality are major components of friendships in the UB program:

Dennis: You can confide in pretty much everyone in the program –

Tom: And that's just *cool*!

Dennis: Pretty much everyone here, you can trust them with pretty much anything you can tell them.

Angela, a Bridge student from a school population of a little over 200, sums it up:

Well, I think - there's not one person in this whole building that hasn't had something happen to them, like their life has not been perfect...Counseling is a big part of it - I mean, everyone has problems, but there aren't really secrets here - because someone connects with someone, and they tell someone something - and that's like, one thing - you open up so much easier here because people are open, they're understanding, half of them have been through the same thing -

### ***Sense of Community***

While not necessarily in this order, I asked students to describe their perception of belonging to their residential, high school, and UB communities. I found that several students felt isolated in, rather than connected to their residential communities. Feelings of belonging to their high school communities depended on multiple elements. For some, feelings of connection to their high school was hindered by the physical condition of their school and sharing the high school with younger students, for others it was the

atmosphere, and staff interaction with them. In most cases, participants felt more sense of belonging to the UB program than to their high schools.

### *Residential*

Almost all students (89%) felt no connection to their residential community though several mentioned kin relations were predominant in those communities. Some factors that may influence students' lack of feeling connected to their communities are transience (27% of the students interviewed commented they had moved into their residential communities recently; some students had moved several times between parents, or from other communities; 3 students had moved to their communities from out of state; and 3 students had immigrated from another country within the last 5 years) and rurality. It is not unusual in rural Maine for students who attend the same high school to live in separate residential areas, and although many students indicated much of their extended families lived within their communities, they also indicated isolation from their peers. Billy responds when asked if he felt connected to his forest community:

Well, I suppose I could go out and hug a tree – they don't give me much of a response! (laughs) ... I hate [names town]. Yeah. There's nothing there...it's basically, yeah – there's nothing for jobs.

Students from other rural communities explained their lack of feeling connected to their communities was also because there was “nothing to do,” and, like Billy, couldn't find a job. As teens, they must travel outside of their community to look for work, go shopping, go to the movies, or even to date. Because of income situations, many don't have access to cars or transportation.

Urban student responses were mixed. While Terina feels very connected to her Latino community, Jamal, from another urban community, believes he is disconnected from his neighborhood because of peer behavior. He states, “I don't like my neighborhood – it's not fun, a lot of kids smoke pot on the corner – they don't really care...some of them are in high school, some of them are older...”

### *High School*

When discussing their high school community, many attached “liking” high school to their sense of belonging to that community. Descriptions of high school included the physical, often structural condi-

tion of the school, and the climate or atmosphere of their high schools. Kayla and Dillon, from a small community, who neither liked nor disliked high school, felt the condition of their high school was an issue for them.

Dillon: The cafeteria is leaking, and they have to fix that –

Kayla: The whole hallway is like this [indicates the basement room where we're interviewing] only it's caved in, all the tiles need to be replaced –

Dillon: We basically go to a trailer park.

Kayla: Yeah, and we go to school in trailers, because not all the buildings in our high school are safe, like the roof is caving in, and so we have to go out the doors and on a ramp...

Dillon: And below 20 degrees – it's pretty cold!

Tom, from a large school of approximately 1200 students, brought up the same type of situation, only in his case it's overcrowding, and portable units have been brought in to lessen class sizes. Although he likes school, he also comments:

I really like [names high school]. It's got like, 13 to 1400 kids. Um...the buildings are too small for the amount of kids that we have, so we have a lot of portables, and like an extra building on the outside, and it really sucks in the wintertime.

Some students pointed out that sharing their schools or portions of their schools with younger students was a negative part of high school. Elise graduated with a class of approximately 20 students. She describes sharing her high school campus with not only middle schoolers, but elementary school children as well:

Yeah, our high school's on 3 floors, and our middle school is also in there, and right across the driveway is the elementary school. They moved the library in there, or part of the library, most of it – it's kind of [pauses] interesting. And our whole gym is in a separate building that *everyone* uses.

The climate or the environment of the high school was more important than size when discussing feelings of connections to high school. Surprisingly, 80% of the students from the large school focus groups had positive feelings of community, while 86% of the students from the small and medium size schools stated they have either no sense, or a neutral sense of belonging to their high school. Two of the five large high school focus groups, however, told me that their schools were organized into smaller sub-

groups. Two of the larger schools were not sub-grouped, and one group didn't indicate if sub-grouping was part of their school configuration. Andy, a recent graduate of a large Massachusetts school, was one of the respondents who stated students at his school must choose a "Pathway." He talks about his school climate:

Well, on the safe issue – I feel pretty safe...fights break out occasionally, but that happens at every school...I like going to school, generally. But if I'm, like, tired or irritable, I'm like 'oh, this again?' – but I like it. I was in the Honors program, and the classes are challenging. They offer you a challenge, so you have something to look forward to when you go. And they, like opposed to just teaching from the textbook, the teachers I had they actually got up and worked with you. So, I enjoyed it.

Dennis attends classes with a sub-group of approximately 800 students (a medium size high school in Maine). He agrees that he also likes school:

I actually like going to school because, like I said, the people are cool, all my teachers are cool, the education is up to par, they have a lot of AP classes and everything. A lot of my friends are in those, so it's pretty cool. And like the computer access is really good, and it's just all pretty cool.

Students who were the most vociferous about the lack of community in their schools were from small and medium sized high schools. Some students were disappointed that choice of courses was inadequate, some said there were not enough teachers, or there was a high teacher turnover. Five students commented school was "boring," and 3 students remarked they felt depressed and tired when attending school. Two students from different small schools said that school felt like "a prison." One exclaimed, "It's worse than prison – it's torture!" (Becky). This small high school focus group discussed their feelings about the climate of their school with me:

CSB: When you walk into your school, how do you feel? What's the general atmosphere?

Matt: I feel like I'm in prison –

John: It's like, damn, another day of school. I mean maybe I like it for the first 2 weeks, just seeing my friends back, you know, the real coolest ones, but it sucks, real fast. So other than that, there's nothing really too exciting. I mean – I looked forward to gym last year – that was about it.

Another group from a medium sized high school discussed how their day begins:

Becky: Like kids say they don't like going to school cause of the work, and bla, bla, bla – well, when you walk into our school – it's like –

Alex: - there's nothing – it's so blank. It's white.

Becky: Yeah, we have no decorations in there. We have no spirit in our school whatsoever.

Elaine: We have a trophy case from like 50 years ago.

When I asked if they felt connected to high school, one group from a small forest community commented:

Billy: No connection whatsoever. This is some place I have to go by law.

Matt: If I had a choice, I would go somewhere else.

Angela: I don't think half the school knew who I was until yearbooks came out. And I'm fine with that because, I didn't have anything constructive to say.

An exception to *not* liking high school was that of a small coastal school with an enrollment of a little over 300 students. All the students in this group agreed that they liked high school, had positive relationships with staff, and little to no cliques within their peer groups.

### *Upward Bound*

Since some of the interviews took place early in the Upward Bound session, some responses regarding the UB community were limited to those who were returning students, which was approximately 60%, or 24 of the 37 interviewees. As the interviews progressed, some of the new students as well, explained they were experiencing what the older students described to me. Of the respondents, 65% told me positive *relationships with staff* was the reason they felt connected to the program. Other reasons were *relationships with peers* (31%), *emotional safety* (13%), and one student declared that she “feels wanted here.” Several students discussed the positive impact that Upward Bound has had on their lives, both academically and in raising their awareness of cultural and personal diversity.

Students commented that staff “care about kids” and “relate to them.” Lee and Andy, students from different urban high schools commented on the academic staff at UB being more like “mentors” than teachers:

Andy: The staff at Upward Bound, they want to be a friend as well as your mentor – and like at school, it's like an - it's not an unwritten rule, because it is written – well, I don't think it's written anywhere, probably in the specific handbook, but they're your teachers, they're the teachers and you're the students, and there's this bar between you. But at Upward Bound it's everyone is helping each other out. And all the staff is there to just make sure, you know, just to facilitate it and make sure it goes smoothly.

Becky and Brianna commented on academic staff “wanting” to be there:



Becky: They actually want to teach us, they could fool around in some rooms, because most of them are [college] students, or studying, but they choose to come here and teach us because they like us!

Brianna: ...[high school teachers] complain all the time, but people here, it's like teachers are happy here – 'any time you need us, any time you want us to be here – if you need any help you just come talk to us any time [pause] any time.'

Another student says the positive feedback she gets from staff is important to her:

Amber: I like it here, kind of better than high school, like if you do something really good, they'd be like – good job, you did a really good job, keep it up – I like positive encouragement like that – it makes me want to try harder.

Students compared friendships in high school to friendships in Upward Bound previously in this paper, and some believe that these relationships, in general, were important in perpetuating feelings of community. Lee, in the Math/Science program, says that attending academic classes is different, and that the students help him focus:

The classes are different here in that the students here – they're very happy and they want to be here – whereas high school, the majority of them, I guess, do want to attend school, but there are a portion of them that doesn't and it kind of does affect others as well...

John, from a small high school, alludes to UB's climate of comfort and safety a few times in his interview. He, like others, finds that students are quick to respond to each other when they need consolation or cheering up:

Like when you're upset here, I mean not really upset real bad, but I mean, just things in the past, I mean, I just go alone to my own place and somehow, somebody finds me, and you know, it's like, you know they went through all this trouble and they want to actually know what my problem is -

Josh agrees that the climate is one of safety, but for him, it's the ease of "being yourself"; acceptance is important to him, but so is autonomy:

Well, it's a lot easier for you to be yourself, because nobody knows you when you come here, so I'm like, you can kind of reinvent yourself, and truly just live your life the way you want to live it and be like here, if you don't want to accept it, that's the way I am and that's your deal, I'm just going to be me –

### ***Impact of belonging***

Since many students believe there was more sense of community in Upward Bound, I asked the students about the impact of belonging to the Upward Bound community, and if they believed it carried

over into their other settings. Twenty of the 24 students who were returners responded, and surprisingly, 3 of the 15 students who were new, believed that UB had “changed” them. From this group 35% believed that participating in the UB program impacted their *academics*; 30% described *affective and social impacts*, such as being shy before the program, and feeling more confidence; 26% believed that they were better at *dealing with people* (some called this *counseling* each other); 22% commented that they had a better understanding of *diversity*, not just with different cultures and ethnicity, but also sexual orientation..

Students believed that UB impacted their academics in many ways. James and Lauren, from a high school of approximately 400 students, talk about impact on their learning within the summer program, and also being monitored by their UB counselor during the school year.

Lauren: If you have an off-the-wall question, I don’t know – we were talking about Buddhists the other day in [UB] English class, or something like that. We went to the Chinese teacher and asked her, and I mean – nobody minded, cause it was question about something you could learn about. But at school if I would have done that, then they would have been like, no, you can’t do that, we won’t talk about that – it’s not English.

James: It helped me. Like if I was doing bad in class during the school year, I’d get these warnings – academic probation, and they’d give you this piece of paper for every week the teacher to fill out show you how you were doing, that helped a lot-

College plans change at Upward Bound, 22% of the student respondents believed that UB helped them make decisions regarding intended college majors; helped them with the application process (including writing college essays, and taking them on college visits, which their parents couldn’t do) and providing application fees and waivers for SATs and ACT entrance exams. For this subset of students, many indicated that Upward Bound was better able to prepare them for college than guidance counselors. Some students told me that they had been directed to vocational schools, and were not happy with the level of support they received from school personnel. Older students indicated they had more opportunities to discuss *what* they wanted to study with Upward Bound counselors and peers. Matt, from a small coastal community, indicated that he had planned to go into the military before Upward Bound, and that Upward Bound helped him realize that he had potential to be a college student.

Students from large and small schools in different geographic locations discuss changes in their personal growth. For many, confidence in themselves and their abilities emerged as a important theme:

Brenda: I used to be really quiet, but actually, I can just go up to random people and be, like, friends with them. And like myself, appreciating myself more, like the talents I have when I went back to high school.

Jamal: Just more confident – before I come to Upward Bound I was pretty quiet, then I came here and get along well with people – started talking more –

Lee: The first couple of years for me were like, it kind of boost up my confidence – I was able to get involved more active in school, taking leadership roles. Before I was a little shy -

Angela and Billy responded that they learned to help others, and Angela learned to be more assertive with peers who were bullying others.

Angela: I know before I came to Upward Bound I was just one of those people where I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, and I was like "don't do that – that's mean" – but this year, I was like, if somebody was picking on somebody, I was like, 'Look, stop' – you know? And I don't know, I'm a completely different person. I completely grew out of my shell.

Billy: Yeah, and you don't really need to distinguish between peer counselors<sup>6</sup> – I don't really know why they have them? Hey, we're peer counselors, all right? I see a lot of them around here.

Angela: Yeah, there are 150 of them!

### **Study Limitations**

Before discussing conclusions, I believe it is important to realize there are multiple environmental variables and distinctive student characteristics that impact a student's growth, both socially and academically. Even though a majority of students agreed that Upward Bound impacts their lives in many ways, it should be noted that because the sample participants voluntarily participate in Upward Bound, they might have characteristics that are atypical of at risk students. There was no control group, so to even speculate the outcomes of students' growth had they not participated in Upward Bound, would be unrealistic.

Another limitation was that 13 of the study participants were new students. Since this represented a little over 40% of the student participants, the lack of experiences in Upward Bound, and reflection on changes, if any, in their self-identity, their self-esteem, and self-efficacy, for many, had not happened. I would speculate given the students' responses, the impact of Upward Bound might be significantly higher if all interviewees had been returning students.

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<sup>6</sup> "Peer counselors" is a component of the summer program. Students are chosen before the program begins to facilitate "counseling" groups.

## Discussion

I have several thoughts after talking with these students, but the one that overshadows this research, for me, is that these teens still need and want adults, even more than peers, to care about them. For many that looks like mutual respect, and being able to talk without a power differential. This leveling of power happened for most students, in the Upward Bound program, but rarely in the high school communities. When it did happen in high school, students were asked to be discreet – and keep it away from administration.

High school is a vast disappointment for many students. I find it problematic, and discouraging as an educator, that some students use descriptors like “boring,” “worse than prison,” and “depressing” when describing their high schools. They are aware when teachers “are not happy to be there” and, apparently, are in ear-shot of their teachers’ complaints about such issues as over-work and salary. It is understandable that they feel no connection in this environment, and no motivation. Many of us would not thrive in a work environment in which we felt unwanted, or uncomfortable, yet we expect students to learn in these settings.

I was not surprised to find that participants felt almost no sense of belonging to their residential community; many had not grown up in these communities, but had moved into these communities, often being shuffled between parents. As this study was not intended to probe into personal lives, some students’ disclosed in the interviews that low SES was also attached to other, more deeply rooted problems, which I did not probe, as we were in a group situation. Also, developmentally, these students are at an age of disengagement from home and wanting to be independent. Not unlike more affluent peers their age, they also see college as a “way out” of their hometowns and for some, their family situations.

Clearly, the Upward Bound program is a model that many communities would do well to emulate. More than an academic program, students have developed a sense of belonging to a community that models adult relationships built on mutual respect, encourages relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and allows them the freedom to “be themselves.” The sense of safety the teens exposed as they discussed issues related to their schools and their lives; their body language; the candor and

intelligence with which they were able to communicate their thoughts; and the ease they had with each other in their focus groups, all led me to believe this was an authentic experience they were sharing together.

Eighty-three percent of the returning teens in this study believe strongly that the Upward Bound community has significantly impacted their lives and their “selves,” and three students reported a social growth after having been in the summer program for less than 3 weeks. Many students believe that UB helps them build self-confidence, be more aware of other’s feelings, and that belonging to Upward Bound positively affects their academic and social growth. Tönnies believed that “a *gemeinschaft* shares similar backgrounds and life experiences in a small community, and all are motivated to work for the good of others” (from Schaefer, (2003) p.121-122). Brianna concurs:

Yeah, because you can go to so-and-so's room and get to know them better. At school, you see them for six hours and then you go home, but Upward Bound it really is a community, and you are around this person a lot more, you experience, you're experiencing Upward Bound together, which is a great thing, which helps you, you know, like share.

Another aspect of *gemeinschaft*, students’ sense of empathy for others, commitment and loyalty to the larger social group, and trying to model the culture and values of this community was also apparent to me throughout our conversations. One student shows her sense of loyalty to the UB program when speaking of an opening activity that students participated in on the first day of the summer program:

It [the activity] didn’t help Becky or me very much. I think it really helped the “nubies” [new students] – and they’re the ones that matter. Because if we lose them, their number, their population, if they don’t come back next year...- and if they go back to school and say ‘Upward Bound sucks and don’t go’ to the sophomores because they didn’t get a chance to bond with anyone- that’s going to hurt Upward Bound. So, whatever helps the nubies, is what we need to do.

So if they are impacted, I wondered, what happens after the program is over? For some, transporting attitudes and values and their “new” outgoing UB persona back to their high school community was “hard.” But many students told me they, like Angela, went back to high school and practiced new behaviors. Randy commented that he was more aware and assertive when he heard the popular adolescent affirmation, “that’s so gay!” and reacted openly with peers who used racial or sexual slurs:

...when I go back to school, people I hang out with would be like ‘oh that’s gay’ or just keep going on like that, and I’d be like, ‘shut up’ and eventually I had to just rag on them like that and

they stopped, and I used to say words like that too, but then I just stopped because I realized that there was no point to it – and I haven't used words like that in years, and like, they'll just drive up and say, hey, what's up? And they'll just drop slurs all over the place, and I'll be like, nobody is even black here – so what do you have to say that?

Although Lauren seems anxious about her return to school, she gives no indication that she is going to “return” to her former self:

I know when I go back to school, I'm, going to be different, but everybody else is going to be the same – and that's going to be weird. I mean how do I go through with that, cause my group will change over that I hang around with – and I hope they don't act the same way –

Some felt more liberated from having to “fit in.” Brenda declares:

...You realize, this is my life. I'm not living for you – I'm living for me. Like, you can go over there and I'll stay over here. Some people don't realize that though, and they're always in your business.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) calls the changes to a new setting a “synergistic function” and believes that cognitive and social growth that transitions between microsystems cannot be solely attributed to maturation (p.24). While difficult to separate the personal characteristics that students bring to their communities from environmental impacts they experience daily, these students do attribute their social-emotional-academic growth to the community they experience at Upward Bound. Participants' sense of well-being can be transported. Says Lauren:

I learned how to deal with people, like, not in a bad way, but if someone starts talking to you, you know how to respond to what they're saying, and then you notice things like what people say and how it could hurt someone.

## **Implications**

In this turn-of-the-century, No Child Left Behind era, mandates often force schools to focus on improving content and monitoring achievement scores. While this might show tangible results quickly, implications for schools to reculture systems so that students feel they are cared about, and that “teachers actually want to be there” may show more long lasting results. These high school students feel they are more motivated learners in an atmosphere of caring and respect. Wood (1999) writes, “In sharing power, through engaging all members in as many decisions as possible, communities see strength” (p.137). Only one group of students (from 12 schools represented) all agreed they “liked” their high school, but also

commented, “Because it was a lot like Upward Bound.” My belief was that a smaller school can better utilize their strengths (i.e., teacher-student ratio, familiar peer groups, smaller class sizes) in developing a sense of community, and therefore have more student success. While this may be true to a point, without developing relationships, the size of the community is not a determinant in student achievement.

The implications for further study are varied. Low-income students are six times more likely than their peers to drop out of high school (NCES, 2004). Because Upward Bound students are low-income, as well as first generation college students, they qualify as “at-risk” due to environmental factors. However, it might be important to study other groups of at-risk students with different environmental and social risk factors. Other studies might research interpersonal relationships and the effect on student achievement in the schools, and/or the influence of perceived power struggles on sense of community. Sense of belonging can be instrumental as an affective-cognitive link. Lee says his sense of belonging to a community is fundamental to happiness:

I think it’s very important, mainly because, once you feel comfortable in a certain environment, whereas you feel like you fit in, you are able to express yourself more, and you’re able to do things with passion, like with joy and stuff, and be able to enjoy life more...

And Elise succinctly ends her interview, “My high school is always like – this is a family! But if UB was a high school, you could truly say, this is my family.”

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